
Created From Animals

The Moral Implications of Darwinism

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The first chapter-- "Darwin's Discovery"--is a wonderful introduction to the life and thoughts of Charles Darwin.

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Introduction

Man in his arrogance thinks himself a great work worthy the interposition of a deity. More humble and I think truer to consider him created from animals.

Darwin wrote these words in 1838, twenty-one years before he was to publish *The Origin of Species*. He would go on to support this idea with overwhelming evidence, and in doing so he would bring about a profound change in our conception of ourselves. After Darwin, we can no longer think of ourselves as occupying a special place in creation-- instead, we must realize that we are products of the same evolutionary forces, working blindly and without purpose, that shaped the rest of the animal kingdom. And this, it is commonly said, has deep philosophical significance.

The religious implications of Darwinism are often discussed. From the outset, churchmen have worried that evolution is incompatible with religion. Whether their concern is justified is still debated, and I will have a good bit to say about this. But Darwinism also poses a problem for traditional morality. Traditional morality, no less than traditional religion, assumes that man is 'a great work.' It grants to humans a moral status superior to that of any other creatures on earth. It regards human life, and only human life, as sacred, and it takes the love of mankind as its first and noblest virtue. What becomes of all this, if man is but a modified ape?

Curiously, philosophers have shown little interest in such questions. The proverbial 'man in the street' might believe that there are big philosophical lessons to be learned from Darwin--or big threats posed by Darwin--but by and large academic thinkers have not agreed. In the decades immediately following the publication of Darwin's theory, some philosophers did have a lot to say about it. Then it was fashionable to think that Darwinism had deep implications for everything. But this interest quickly waned. If we examine the most influential works of philosophy written in the twentieth century, we find few references to Darwin. His theory is discussed, of course, in works devoted narrowly to the philosophy of science. But in philosophical works of more general interest, and particularly in books about ethics, it is largely ignored. When the subject is broached, it is usually to explain that Darwinism does not have some implication it is popularly thought to have. The philosophers seem to agree with Wittgenstein's assessment: 'The Darwinian theory,' said Wittgenstein, 'has no more to do with philosophy than any other hypothesis of

natural science.'

Why have philosophers, with a few exceptions, been so indifferent to Darwin? Partly it may be a reaction to the absurdity of claims that were once made. When he first read the *Origin*, Karl Marx declared that 'Darwin's book is very important and serves me as a basis in natural selection for the class struggle in history.' Later socialists made similar judgements, claiming to find in Darwin the 'scientific basis' of their political views. Meanwhile, capitalists were also claiming him: in the late nineteenth century the idea of 'the survival of the fittest' was invoked again and again to justify competitive economic systems. In 1900 the American industrialist Andrew Carnegie wrote that we must 'accept and welcome . . . great inequality; the concentration of business, industrial and commercial, in the hands of a few; and the law of competition between these, as being not only beneficial, but essential to the future progress of the race.' Why? Because capitalism alone 'ensures the survival of the fittest.' To make things even worse, Heinrich Himmler would later claim that Darwinism supported purging Europe of the 'unfit' Jews. Exasperation with such nonsense might very well provoke a reaction like Wittgenstein's. In the face of all this, it is tempting simply to throw up one's hands and say: Darwin's theory is about biology, *not* politics or economics or ethics or religion or anything else.

Educated people might resist the idea that Darwinism has moral implications for still another reason. Many people today think that Darwinism is *contrary* to true morality, and they reject it for that reason. Most of the current resistance to Darwinism seems to be at least partially motivated by this thought. In the United States, there are those who would like to ban the teaching of evolution in public schools; to stir up public feeling, they point to its supposedly obnoxious implications for religion and morality. The argument is depressingly familiar. The idea that Darwinism undermines traditional values has now been used so often as a reason for objecting to the theory that scientifically minded people might naturally think it is nothing but an ignorant notion, to be rejected out of hand.

The leading defenders of evolution take just this position--they insist that their theory can pose no threat to morality or religion because their theory *has no* implications for morality or religion. Stephen Jay Gould, one of the foremost contemporary defenders of Darwinism, and certainly our most effective writer on the subject, responds to the right-wing challenge by deploring 'the silly dichotomy of science versus religion,' and by assuring his readers that 'While I'm not a conventional believer, I don't consider myself irreligious.' He goes on to urge that there is no conflict between Darwinism and old-fashioned

values, or, for that matter, any kind of values at all:

What challenge can the facts of nature pose to our own decisions about the moral value of our lives? We are what we are, but we interpret the meaning of our heritage as we choose. Science can no more answer the questions of how we ought to live than religion can decree the age of the earth.

Thus, as the debate goes on, only two positions seem possible: the fundamentalist view that Darwinism undermines traditional values, and so must be rejected; and the evolutionist reply that Darwinism poses no threat to traditional values. When the lines are drawn this way, it is difficult to take seriously the possibility that Darwinism might have moral consequences--especially the notion that Darwinism undermines traditional morality--without seeming to side with evolution's enemies. The upshot is that, in learned circles, it is commonly taken to be a sign of enlightenment to believe that Darwinism has no implications for ethics. Lost in the fog is the possibility of a third alternative: that Darwinism is incompatible with traditional morality, and so provides reason for rejecting that morality and replacing it with something better.

But there is a deeper, more principled reason for scepticism about finding moral lessons in Darwinism, hinted at in Gould's argument. That is the old problem of the relation of fact and value, of 'is' and 'ought'. We cannot, as a general rule, validly derive conclusions about what *ought* to be the case from premisses about what *is* the case. Darwin's theory, if it is correct, concerns matters of fact. It tells us what is the case, with respect to the evolution of species. Therefore, strictly speaking, no conclusion follows from it regarding any matter of value. It does not follow, merely because we are kin to the apes, that we ought to think less of ourselves, that our lives are less important, or that human beings are 'merely' one kind of animal among others. Nor does it follow that the main tenets of religion are false. As has often been observed, natural selection could be the means by which God has chosen to make man. If so, man could still be regarded as the divinely blessed crown of creation.

Nevertheless, nagging thoughts remain. Can it really be true that Darwinism, which overturns all our former ideas about man and nature, has no unsettling consequences? Traditional morality is based, in part, on the idea that human life has a special value and worth. If we must give up our inflated conception of ourselves, and our picture of the world as made exclusively for our habitation, will we not have to give up, at the same time, those elements of our morality which

depend on such conceptions? The feeling that Darwin's discovery undermines traditional religion, as well as some parts of traditional morality, will not go away, despite the nice logical points about what follows from what, and despite the fact that one might not want to side with evolution's enemies. I believe this feeling is justified. There is a connection between Darwin's theory and these larger matters, although the connection is more complicated than simple logical entailment.

I shall argue that Darwin's theory does undermine traditional values. In particular, it undermines the traditional idea that human life has a special, unique worth. Thus, although I am a Darwinian, I will be defending a thesis that Darwin's friends have usually resisted. But I do not assume, as Darwin's enemies have assumed, that this implication of Darwinism is morally pernicious. I believe it is a positive and useful result that should be welcomed, not resisted. Abandoning the idea that human life has special importance does not leave us morally adrift; it only suggests the need for a different and better anchor.

Darwin said that *The Origin of Species* was "one long argument." At the risk of seeming presumptuous, I would like to say the same thing about the present book, that it also elaborates one long argument. The book contains a good bit of intellectual history. This history is recounted, partly to provide background, but also because I want to present my philosophical argument in the context of the human events that made it possible. Philosophical arguments are often presented ahistorically, as abstract chains of reasoning whose logical validity is independent of cultural context. There is nothing wrong with that way of writing; indeed, it has been the norm among philosophers for most of this century. But in this book I have departed from this practice and have included somewhat more historical material than is usual in a philosophy book that has an argument.

The argument may be summarized briefly:

1. Traditional morality depends on the idea that human beings are in a special moral category: from a moral point of view, human life has a special, unique value, while nonhuman life has relatively little value. Thus the purpose of morality is conceived to be, primarily, the protection of human beings and their rights and interests. This is commonly referred to as the idea of human dignity. But this idea does not exist in a logical vacuum. Traditionally it has been supported in two ways: first, by the notion that man is made in the image of God, and second, by the notion that man is a uniquely rational being.

2. Darwin's theory does not entail that the idea of human dignity is

false--to say that it does would violate the logical stricture against deriving 'ought' from 'is'. Darwinism does, however, *undermine* the traditional doctrine, in a sense that I will explain, by taking away its support. Darwinism undermines both the idea that man is made in the image of God and the idea that man is a uniquely rational being. Furthermore, if Darwinism is correct, it is unlikely that any other support for the idea of human dignity will be found. The idea of human dignity turns out, therefore, to be the moral effluvium of a discredited metaphysics.

3. To replace the doctrine of human dignity, I offer a different conception, moral individualism, which I argue is more in keeping with an evolutionary outlook. According to moral individualism, the bare fact that one is human entitles one to no special consideration. How an individual should be treated depends on his or her own particular characteristics, rather than on whether he or she is a member of some preferred group--even the 'group' of human beings. I offer various reasons for thinking this approach is morally sound, as well as reasons for thinking it is the natural view to take if one views the world from an evolutionary perspective.

4. Finally, abandoning the idea of human dignity, and adopting moral individualism in its place, has practical consequences. Human life will no longer be regarded with the kind of superstitious awe which it is accorded in traditional thought, and the lives of nonhumans will no longer be a matter of indifference. This means that human life will, in a sense, be devalued, while the value granted to nonhuman life will be increased. A revised view of such matters as suicide and euthanasia, as well as a revised view of how we should treat animals, will result. I hope to show that reconstructing morality without the assumption of man's specialness leaves morality stronger and more rational. It leaves us with a better ethic concerning the treatment of both human and nonhuman animals.

There is one other theme I wish to pursue, about the scope of Darwin's work. As we shall see, Darwin himself had a good bit to say about morality and religion. But his remarks on these subjects are often ignored, or treated as only marginally interesting. The assumption seems to be that his views about morality and religion are independent of his strictly scientific project and have less value. Darwin himself, however, seems to have believed that all his thinking was of one piece. I shall argue that he was right: he may profitably be viewed as a systematic thinker whose views on all these subjects are closely related. Today almost everyone agrees that Darwin was a profound thinker. But I hope to show that he was a deeper thinker on a wider range of subjects than is commonly realized.

--James Rachels

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